

The Briefing

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Can a Christian go to reiki?

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The West has taken on more and more of eastern traditional and mystical approaches to healing. Does this pose any problems for Christians?

We live in an unfit office world of bad backs and stiff necks. So you're looking around for treatment or exercise that will loosen some of that tension, strengthen the back muscles, generally be a good, balancing part of a healthy lifestyle. Sure, there are orthopedic specialists and physios, but what about all the other things on offer? Your hairdresser swears by reiki—the mystical healing by laying on hands—and insists that it really works. Everywhere you're seeing advertisements for tai chi and qui gong, promising to bring relaxation. Even your local gym is offering yoga classes. They're becoming more and more part of normal western living, particularly in the city. Is it okay for a Christian to go to these things?

Do they work?

For a lot of traditional therapies, the standard 'western' criticism is simply that they don't work. They have no scientific basis, and controlled tests show no real therapeutic value. Homeopathy has been comprehensively dismissed by the scientific establishment. Some of the naturopathic techniques of manipulating bones and muscles have been known to cause severe injuries. Iridology, reflexology and a lot of herbal treatments are regarded with similar scorn. Indeed,

some herbal treatments have been known to cause actual poisoning. There are definite dangers in uncontrolled dosages. But there are some ‘alternative’ treatments that are acknowledged as beneficial. GPs often recommend acupuncture, which does indeed seem to work—perhaps by stimulating the body’s healing mechanisms.

Yoga is another system that is recommended by orthopaedic specialists to correct posture and help bad backs. Even some of the ‘weirder’ therapies can seem to have something in them. Although I would be inclined to dismiss reiki altogether, I have heard credible witnesses claim that there really is a radiant heat generated from the healer’s hand. Similarly, I never paid much heed to the notion of ‘chi’, the ‘life force’ meant to be manipulated by tai chi and chi gong. But again, credible sources have testified to it being something real. Maybe there is more to the body than western science presently understands; human bodies are certainly incredibly complicated.

In other words, it appears that some esoteric therapies really do work, even if they are not currently part of western medicine. Is that a good enough reason to subscribe to them? Can a Christian go to reiki?

Is it the work of demons?

From the Christian literature on the subject, a common objection is that even though these things may work, it is the work of demons, and so Christians should not be involved.

At this point, we need to be very careful about how we categorize things. Demons, or unclean spirits, are real, as the New Testament relates. They are the enemies of God and Christ, and so we should probably stay away from anything they’re involved with. Are yoga, tai chi, and so on such activities? We should not necessarily jump to that conclusion. Demons in the New Testament are not in the habit of healing people; they’re described as hurting people and trying to kill them, if anything. Moreover, there’s no reason to suppose that something unexplained is therefore inexplicable. If there is a real ‘chi’ force, and serious scientific study is devoted to it, there’s no reason to suppose an explanation won’t be found. Only a few centuries ago magnetism was considered magical; electricity was only beginning to be studied in the 19th century. We don’t know everything yet. To claim that something strange is the work of demons rings more of superstition than a sensible Christian response.

Yet for anyone worried about the possibility, fortunately we do have a Christian example of how to respond to strange practices, even if they possibly involve demons. I’m thinking of Paul’s argument in [1 Corinthians 10](http://www.gnpbc.org/esv/search/?q=1%20Corinthians%2010) (<http://www.gnpbc.org/esv/search/?q=1%20Corinthians%2010>) about meat sacrificed to idols. “Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience”, he says. “For the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof” (vv.25, 26). Paul asserts this even though he has just given a very strong warning against idolatry, which he says is actually demon worship. “You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons” (v.21). Even so, it can be quite all right for a Christian to eat meat that may well have been sacrificed to a demon. The only reason Paul suggests against doing so is if it offends the

conscience of another. It is not because the demons might hurt you; it is entirely because another person with a weaker conscience might be offended.

Following this logic, a Christian could go to tai chi or yoga with a completely free conscience on his or her own behalf, even in the case that those who run the classes worship false gods, which may really be demons. If, however, a Christian friend is worried about this, or is in danger of being led astray because of a fellow Christian's action, then that person should stop attending immediately. For your own sake, you may go, and be properly thankful to God for the benefits it gives to your back. For someone else's sake, you might decide to stop. But you are not personally in danger of being contaminated by demons. They cannot make *you* unclean; after all, if you are a Christian, the spirit of Jesus who conquered death and demons has cleansed you.

However, we do not have to assume that there is any strange 'power' involved in alternative or eastern therapies. After all, sitting still in a good posture in yoga and consciously relaxing probably *will* make you a calmer person; that's just common sense. It's not surprising that moving slowly through gentle exercises in tai chi can be soothing. There's no reason to accept the religious explanation that the serenity is part of spiritual empowerment, or the result of centering your life force or any such thing. We don't need to resort to the idea of mysterious powers at all—demonic or otherwise. Once you see what such exercises actually involve, their explanation can be quite prosaic; not life-force, or mystical experience, but a sensible 'time out' from a busy lifestyle.

But doesn't it encourage false teaching?

The more subtle problem is that of false teaching. Although there is probably not any actual demonic power in alternative therapies, there is no denying that several involve totally false teaching about God. This is not always evident from the receiving end. Many teachers of yoga classes simply teach the exercises; doing the exercises, or even teaching them, doesn't have to involve any philosophy at all. I take it you could receive reiki treatment without the healer saying anything to you; the literature on reiki says it works regardless of your belief. Nonetheless, the beliefs behind these systems are idolatrous. Some yoga gurus claim to be God, and accept worship from their followers. At this point, a Christian will probably want nothing to do with such people—not because he or she would be in danger from demons, but because Christians would not want to be part of any organization that encourages such idolatry.

On the other hand, there are great opportunities for evangelism in attending alternate therapies. You might explain to a healer that you do not believe the healing rays come from the universal God-consciousness, or that the serenity of a yogi does not come from enlightenment, but that all good things come from the God of our Lord Jesus Christ who has created the world with many useful things in it. Thanks to God, if we understand the mechanics of posture better and do exercises that encourage good posture, we'll feel better. Thanks to God, when we understand that stress can be bad for us, and that conscious relaxation can reduce stress, then we can develop therapies. If they work, it's because God is

good to us. That's a good basis for a discussion with those you meet through alternative therapy, who may well be quite open to talking about God. Often people involved in such activities are doing so *because* they're curious about God.

My conclusion? Yes, I think it is permissible for a Christian to do yoga, or go to reiki, or learn tai chi. I think the explanations you receive from the practitioners as to why these techniques work will be totally wrong; that where they do work, it is simply another instance of God's wonderful creativity in this universe. It will probably provide you with good opportunities for evangelism, even though it can be quite awful hearing their false teaching and seeing people around you blindly following to their destruction. Certainly becoming involved in organizations which follow false teaching is not something you can do blithely; you can never go along, forgetting that you are a Christian. It should confront you and challenge you to speak and oppose the teaching where appropriate. And if your attendance ever offends the conscience of someone else, do not go.

Other dangers

Before leaving this topic, it has occurred to me over the years that there are other regimes for the body that are also dangerous—maybe even more dangerous for the Christian than any eastern therapy based on false gods. For at least the eastern therapies are known to be non-Christian. We know that they are likely to have false philosophies. Far more dangerous is the therapy with a non-Christian philosophy that is hidden. There are exercise systems based on alternative religions that the practitioners nonetheless claim are entirely free of philosophy or religious views.

That is, in many ways, the aerobics class at the local gym can be far more dangerous to a Christian, spiritually, than any idol-worshipping yogi.

The trouble is, you go to the aerobics class thinking it is entirely free of spiritual content. Certainly the organization will assure you of that. But in fact there is a very strong philosophy that I have found being taught and modelled in secular gyms, and that is worship of the physical self. The goal is the perfect body, and goodness is defined in terms of fitness. If you miss a gym class, that's being naughty. If you eat chocolate cake, you should feel guilty about it. But if you do an extra class, then you can feel really virtuous. This is an insidious teaching, but I have seen it take over people's entire lives, and I have felt the temptation of it myself. The wall-to-wall mirrors at the gym encourage it; you are told to imagine the day when what you see in the mirror is thin thighs and hard triceps, or bulging deltoids and six-pack abs. The muscle-bound instructors model their gospel of salvation by low body-mass index. It is a real religion, and it is one of terrible bondage.

I am sure the same kind of analysis could be given to many systems of physical fitness or therapy which purport to be purely physical. For some years, I did ballet. It's a subtly different philosophy from the gym, but it is even stronger. I have never been involved in organized sport, but I wonder about that too. In many ways, I think the devil can be more powerful in these secular, western exercise regimes than anything he does in eastern, idolatrous ones. Indeed, our

preoccupation with the danger of alternate therapies probably helps blind us to the spiritual dangers of the home-grown ones—a clever tactic of the master of lies.

None of these things have to be bad. Physical training is, after all, of value; it's a good thing to be healthy, and God has provided us with many ways of attaining good health. Let's receive them, sensibly, with thanksgiving, and not mistake any of them for the true gospel.